

REINVENTING



BY BARRY SINGER

Reinvigorating the old has long been opera's primary source of vitality.

With new works allowed such infrequent entrée into the permanent repertory, a century or so of ingenuity has largely been expended resurrecting both the sacrosanct and the forgotten, again and again. This reductiveness remains opera's vampiric lifeblood.

Where operas once were merely revived, though, they are today more often revised, revamped, resituated, retrofitted and remodeled. The objective of this "reinvention of the repertory," as it is affectionately known in the business, could not be simpler: to render the standard opera repertory's remote settings and retrogressive music somehow relevant today.

Grasping for relevance is, of course, the sport of popular culture — one of its basic survival mechanisms, indisputably energizing, if increasingly desperate. In an age when last year's hit reality-television show is already so much zeitgeist dust, what chance do old operas have? In fact, it can be amusing in this context, and more than a bit instructive, to think of opera's static, standard repertory as two-hundred-plus years of reality television with much better music. In both, the nar-

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In 1953, Roif Gérard's designs for the Metropolitan Opera's production of *Tannhäuser* (opposite page) presented a traditional version of Wagner's song hall; notable contemporary re-imaginings of the Wagnerian landscape have included Robert Wilson's 1997 Met *Lohengrin* (above) and Peter Sellars's staging of *Tannhäuser* for Lyric Opera of Chicago, in 1988 (below)

native arcs are fundamentally the same: survival of the fittest, with favorite and villainous characters systematically dispatched in ever more dastardly ways; some to return and sing about their ill treatment, others to disappear, until next time.



Viewed from this perspective, the reinvention of the repertory becomes less an act of artistic sustenance and more a pursuit of ratings, in the Nielsen sense. Like television in its golden age, opera in its heyday garnered big "ratings," one might say, with big names: a Caruso, Pinza or Callas (opera's own Uncle Miltie, Desi or Lucy) starring in the operatic equivalents of sitcoms (*buffa*), melodramas (*seria*) or variety shows (*operetta*). Audiences back then similarly immersed themselves in the verities of opera and television with an unquestioning belief verging on abject surrender. Those days are gone. Familiarity has bred a kind of contempt for each medium that no star turn can decisively breach, though the psycho-dramas of a Michael Jackson or a Luciano Pavarotti still manage to on occasion, if fleetingly.

Understood in this way, contemporary opera's often trendy revisionist interventions become infi-



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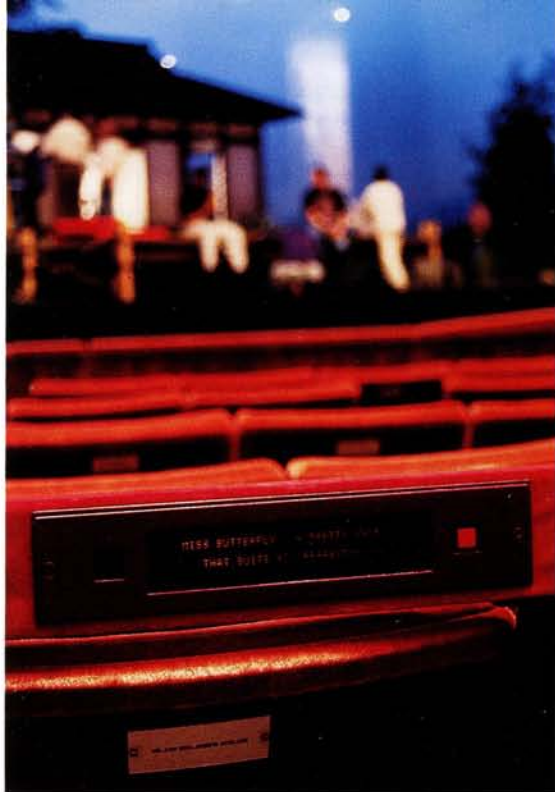
more often retrofitted and remodeled.

Theo Adam's 1972 staging of *Le Nozze di Figaro* at Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin (above) preserved the elegant eighteenth-century flavor of Mozart's opera; Calixto Bieto's reinvention of *Un Ballo in Maschera* (right), produced at English National Opera in 2002 with Claire Rutter (Amelia) and David Kempster (Anckarström), thrust Verdi's aristocrats into a contemporary milieu that was high on shock value



nately more comprehensible.

Take the most common gambit: updating an opera to an era other than its own. Hollywood has long loved to cannibalize film history in this fashion — Streisand's "A Star is Born" and the Pacino Cubano–Miami remake of *Scarface* come readily to mind — and television loves to cannibalize Hollywood, in turn. Think of Christopher Reeve on the tube, updating Hitchcock's *Rear Window* just a few years ago. Why shouldn't opera enjoy the instant contemporaneity afforded by such transpositions? And, of course, opera has, *con gusto*. Peter Sellars's tossing of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* into '80s pop-schlock America, with *Tannhäuser* as the disgraced televangelist Jimmy Swaggart, was one of the earlier and more successful chronological spins, as was Sellars's '80s *Le Nozze di Figaro*, dropped down into the then-newly-built Trump Tower.



Met Titles (above) bring opera closer to everyone; Hollywood's penchant for re-making the classics has given us three versions of *A Star Is Born* (opposite): William A. Wellman's 1937 original, with Janet Gaynor and Fredric March; George Cukor's 1954 musical starring James Mason and Judy Garland; and a 1976 rock soap-opera directed by Frank Pierson, with Kris Kristofferson and Barbra Streisand

The reason these "reinventions" worked is easy to identify, though hardly so easy to achieve. The period detail and values of the new did not obscure the relationships of the originals but crystallized them on our own terms. The essential emotions were thus preserved, if not heightened by the updating. And we, as a contemporary audience, felt this through the music, just as the composers and librettists intended us to.

Of course, updating does not always work out so eloquently. For every *Scarface*, Hollywood has turned out carloads of *Love Bugs*. For every Christopher Reeve in *Rear Window*, television has produced ... well, more Christopher Reeve in *Rear Window*. And yes, the list of wacky opera updatings is long.

A corollary to the updated-period opera is the disorienting opera relocation. For some reason (perhaps a reflexive identification with iron-fisted impositions of will on the relatively weak), the directors of a preponderance of these productions have found dour, generic Fascist settings their ideal, beginning with what may have been one of the very first, Achim Freyer's notorious Frankfurt *Fidelio* of the late 1970s, a study in Gestapo-esque trench coats and headwear. Despite a rampant humorlessness, many of opera's ensuing relocations have at times more readily seemed kin to television's formulaic fish-out-of-water sitcom scenarios, from *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Green Acres* right through reality T.V.'s Paris Hilton and her pal cluelessly wan-

dering the countryside. More often, though, they have come across as the operatic equivalents of witness-protection-program television movies of the week. As viewers, we know these operas have long, long records, just like that ex-con resettled in some Arizona suburb. Still, it can be fun to realize that we don't quite recognize them.

Ours is a culture consumed with close-ups. We are all privy to a proximity granted by the prying lens eye that no previous generation could imagine. Operagoers are hardly immune to the contemporary compulsion to draw ever nearer and more personal. Nor is the culture of the close-up in opera merely a function of flaring nostrils and trembling jaw-lines — the inside views provided to millions by years of PBS opera broadcasts. Rather, it is an expectation that overshadows all live performance today, whether we realize it or not — a demand for a seeming intimacy that opera, by its very scale, has difficulty managing.

The key word here is "seeming." Live performances outside opera today — as defined by arena rock concerts or football and basketball in mega-sports stadiums — are, of course, the antithesis of intimate. Remember, though, that giant video screens dominate all of these events. (And ignore for the moment the fact that giant-screen video is in the experimental stage at certain opera houses, Houston Grand Opera, for one.) Our epoch's biggest live performers — the ballplayers, the wrestlers, the rappers, the pop jiggers — may all possess the visibility of ants on a hill. Still, the demand for close-ups is fulfilled.

Inevitably, opera's desire to reinvent its repertory is also driven by this demand. Even away from their home-entertainment centers, contemporary audience members are more passive viewers than



engaged spectators. Most are no longer content (or, in many cases, equipped) to watch and listen actively from afar.

For this reason, projected titles now constitute opera's single most powerful reinventive tool. By providing viewers with the precise context for all the action and all the musical sounds that heretofore, for



1954's James Stewart thriller *Rear Window* (above) was reinvented in 1998 with Christopher Reeve (right)



most, arrived without any literal narrative sense, super-titles have effectively become the equivalent of the tightest camera shots. Yes, they are intrusive. But they also bring opera closer to everyone.

Complementing the curse of the close-up is the more generic affliction of twenty-first-century audiences: chronic desensitization. Mayhem in all media has systematically dulled our senses (to say nothing of many eardrums). To wake an audience up, to penetrate its often-insensate density, shock is sometimes best deployed. Shock can also blast away the encrustation of a century or more of performance formalities piled atop an opera's own rigid, inbuilt period mores. Face it, shock gets everyone's attention. Whether it's English National Opera's recent *Un Ballo in Maschera*, raising the curtain on fourteen chorus members astride fourteen toilets, or Richard Strauss's *Salome* first slipping off her veils in 1907 at the Met, shock grabs an audience, however peremptorily. This is not even a truth borrowed from television. Shock in performance obviously predates *Fear Factor*. Still, opera cannot deny that it has here looked to television for direction. In fact, if any new opera has a chance at busting into the standard repertory sooner rather than later, based solely on widespread public recognition, it may well be that sine qua non of shock, *Jerry Springer: The Opera*.

Beyond television values, though, beyond close-ups, beyond injecting the shock of the new, what best recharges an old opera for a new audience? As ever, the answer remains: artistry. Interpreting the music with sensitivity, framing the music with enriching theatrical invention that illuminates a narrative's essence and renders its story-telling power comprehensible to a contemporary audience is, in sum, a pretty sure formula.

Any opera's surface pomposities can be deflated. A stilted style can be re-costumed. An old tale can be enlivened. An old setting can be updated. These are the components of opera's artificial reality. All are, in a sense,



dispensable. Stripping artificial reality away so that fundamental reality may be revealed — this is reinvention that probes an opera's depths. And depths, in the end, are what separate opera from television decisively. Depths, for better or worse, as Orpheus knew them — through music.

This season, the Metropolitan Opera dusts off two operas that it has never before produced, both of which stand somewhat apart from the classic repertory. As an early-eighteenth-century work, Handel's *Rodelinda* nearly predates the standard repertory's traditional time-slot brackets, while Alfano's *Cyrano de Bergerac*, as a twentieth-century creation, nearly post-dates them.

Asking what these operas will look like is, in a narrow sense, a television question once again and, thus, irrelevant. What matters is what these operas will make us feel, and how. Clearly, neither will sound entirely like the war-horses of the standard repertory. No doubt this is partly why the Met chose them, as counterbalance against *Die Zauberflöte* and *Faust*, the elder pair that will also receive new productions this season.

Which of the four will require the most reinvention? Some would argue that resurrections of the sacrosanct (*Zauberflöte* and *Faust* in this instance) demand the most thorough and ruthless reinventing, in order to allow audiences to see the familiar anew. Others would insist that resurrections of the forgotten or near-forgotten (*Cyrano* and *Rodelinda*) are de facto the most vital kind of reinvention — turning the neglected into something new.

Both arguments are accurate. And both are pretty much beside the point. After all, isn't reinvention, in the end, really in the mind of the beholder?

BARRY SINGER is the author of *Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theater and Beyond*, recently published by Applause Theater Books. His libretto and lyrics for the new musical *Misia*, with music by Vernon Duke, will premiere this September at the Ravinia Festival in Chicago.

Two views of *Parsifal* at Bayreuth:
Wieland Wagner's production in 1955 with
Dietrich Fischer Dieskau as Amfortas,
offered stark simplicity
in the Grail scene (opposite);
in 2004, Christoph Schlingensief's
staging presented graphic images
of death in Act III (below)

